POLLING: Environmental group's survey buttresses climate action in the Senate

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Body

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Two-thirds of American voters support federal action curtailing carbon emissions, according to a poll released yesterday by an environmental group, which used the findings to press lawmakers to pass global warming legislation.

The results reinforce the sharp partisan divide on the effects of climate change and the steps that could be taken to reduce emissions from major industries in the United States. But they conflict with a CBS News/New York Times poll last week showing that far fewer Americans believe the climate issue should be a government priority.

The newly released poll, commissioned by the National Wildlife Federation, found that 67 percent of registered voters support government limits on greenhouse gases. Also, 82 percent of respondents want the government to invest more in renewable energy programs.

"There is overwhelming public support for the Senate to pass legislation with firm limits on carbon pollution that will stimulate massive new investments in clean energy technologies and create entire new industries and millions of new jobs," said Jeremy Symons, senior vice president of the environmental group. "A supermajority of Americans want action now."

The Senate began debating climate legislation this fall that would reduce emissions, create a carbon market and provide billions for adaptive measures. The House passed its version of the bill, with a target of reducing emissions 17 percent by 2020, in June. This month, President Obama committed to that same target in global climate talks in Copenhagen. Mood changes around money

But there's bound to be a fierce fight over those aspirations on Capitol Hill, where the two parties view climate change through different lenses. Yesterday's poll found that 91 percent of Democratic voters believe climate change is happening, compared with just 43 percent of Republican voters. It also found that 64 percent of independents believe the issue is real.

The poll did not ask respondents if humans were causing the changes.

Several polls are finding that Americans think climate change is a threat, including the CBS News/New York Times survey conducted earlier this month, which found 70 percent of respondents believe it is a "serious problem."

But when it comes to action, the mood can change. That same poll found that just 37 percent of Americans believe climate change should be a government priority.

Symon blamed that outcome on the poll's wording, and on a campaign by the energy industry that he says has incorrectly scared people into believing that carbon controls will undermine the economy.

No poll, he said, should provide an "either-or" choice between protecting the environment and stimulating the economy. They can be the same thing, he asserts.

"You gotta watch out when [pollsters] set up a false dichotomy that doesn't actually exist in the public's mind, because it doesn't exist in reality," Symon said.

A Washington Post/ABC News poll conducted Dec. 10-13 found support for government curbs on carbon from power plants, cars and factories. Fifty percent of respondents strongly favored that action, and 15 percent supported it "somewhat." On the other side, 20 percent strong opposed that move, while 9 percent somewhat disagreed.

When asked if they supported carbon limits if the limits increased their monthly energy bill by $25, 55 percent of respondents said they favored climate regulation, and 42 percent said they did not.

The National Wildlife Federation poll was conducted by Benenson Strategy Group Dec. 12-15. The firm interviewed 1,000 registered voters nationwide, and the results have a 3.1 percent margin of error.

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